

From Post-Traumatic Growth to Post-Traumatic Development

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Abstract

While the concept of post traumatic growth has dominated trauma research for decades, mounting evidence indicates that much of the reported growth may be illusory and driven by cognitive biases. This editorial introduces a novel framework: Post-Traumatic Development (PTD). Moving beyond subjective coping mechanisms, post traumatic development emphasizes six core dimensions including perspective, narration, life style, concentration, virtue-orientation and personality traits, providing a more robust lens for understanding human adaptation following severe adversity.

The world is continually confronted with various crises, disasters, and traumatic events. While some of these, such as floods, earthquakes, and storms, stem from natural phenomena, others, like war or sexual assault, are human-made. Furthermore, the emergence of digital technologies and the expanding use of technology have exposed humanity to novel types of incidents, such as cyberattacks, which warrant special attention. When facing and recovering from disasters or traumas, individuals traverse diverse pathways. Some may experience a severe event merely as a stressor, employing conventional coping mechanisms. For others, severe events may be perceived as exceeding their capacity to cope, thus constituting a traumatic event. Upon encountering a traumatic event, the majority of individuals may demonstrate resilience, returning to their baseline level of functioning (Suri, 2012). Another group may perceive the event as overwhelming, subsequently developing various psychological disorders (Hogg et al., 2022), including but not limited to depression (Wang et al., 2023), or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Strahl, 2012). However, a third group not only exhibits resilience but may also experience Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG).

The concept of PTG was introduced in the 1990s by Tedeschi and Calhoun, and since then, extensive research has been conducted in this domain. According to Tedeschi and Calhoun's framework, PTG occurs across five domains: Improved relationships, finding new possibilities and new pathways, promoting personal strength and self-reliance, strengthening spiritual beliefs, and having an increased appreciation for life and its value (Tedeschi et al., 2018).

Although this model has served as a catalyst for subsequent research and expanded our knowledge regarding human responses to trauma, it has also faced significant criticisms. Many researchers worldwide argue that PTG may not represent a genuine, objective, and structural change, but rather an illusory perception driven by cognitive biases (Boals, 2023). In their study, Gower et al. (2022) raise several fundamental critiques of the PTG construct. The primary and most critical objection targets the common measurement tools for PTG (such as the PTGI). These instruments require individuals to look back at their past, recall their pre-trauma psychological state, evaluate their current state, and subsequently attribute the magnitude of change to the traumatic event. The article posits that PTG possesses a "Janus-Face": one constructive and genuine, and the other deceptive and illusory. The core critique is that, to escape the pain and suffering induced by trauma, many individuals unconsciously fabricate a false narrative of "having grown" to avoid confronting the harsh reality of the event.

By reviewing 47 studies, the article provides robust evidence demonstrating that cognitive biases play a prominent role in shaping PTG reports. The critique asserts that individuals may not have actually experienced genuine growth, rather, their perceived growth is driven by a constellation of cognitive biases. Specifically, individuals may engage in downward comparison to preserve self-esteem by concluding they are better off than those who suffered more, or employ positive attention bias by selectively focusing on minor positive changes while ignoring lingering harm. Furthermore, driven by the cultural narrative that suffering leads to growth, individuals may simply assume they have grown without objectively evaluating their psychological state, while social desirability bias leads them to subconsciously tailor their questionnaire responses to present themselves in a positive light. Finally, memory bias may cause individuals to retrospectively recall their pre-trauma part as darker than it actually was, thereby making their current state appear brighter and more evolved by contrast. One of the most serious critiques raised in this context pertains to the clinical application of PTG. The authors warn that if a substantial portion of the reported PTG is merely a "cognitive illusion," then, therapeutic protocols designed to "facilitate post-traumatic growth" may, in reality, produce no genuine and lasting positive changes, but merely reinforce the client's cognitive biases (Gower et al. 2022).

Similarly, Jacobson et al. (2021), through their critiques of the PTG construct, convey the message that genuine post-traumatic growth is a rare phenomenon, and what is often reported is a combination of attributional errors and defense mechanisms aimed at avoiding the pain of trauma. The criticisms directed at the concept of PTG underscore the necessity of transitioning toward alternative concepts that might better capture the more diverse dimensions of post-trauma changes.

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It appears that some individuals, following severe or unexpected events that are foundational yet not necessarily clinical traumas (such as encountering a highly influential person), undergo a form of structural and qualitative transformations in their lives and even their personalities. As the Editor-in-Chief of Research in Cognitive and Behavioral Sciences Journal, I draw your attention to the following questions in this regard.

Can we explain the phenomenon of profound changes following exposure to traumas or severe and intense events using a concept other than PTG, one that I term Post-Traumatic Development (PTD)? In my view, PTD refers to objective, structural, and behavioral changes that cannot be explained solely by positive attention bias or pain denial. This is because the changes an individual experiences do not necessarily help reduce psychological pain, but rather enable the individual to confront the world in a completely new way. In PTD, the individual transcends mere coping mechanisms and moves toward structural development; these changes may manifest in the following dimensions:

- Perspective,
- Narration,
- Life style,
- Concentration,
- Virtue-orientation, and
- Changes in personality traits.

PTD is not merely an internal feeling, as proposed in post-trauma growth questionnaires; rather, it represents profound, observable transformations in a human being's life.

Ultimately, transitioning from the paradigm of post-traumatic “growth” to “development” is a necessary step to move beyond cognitive illusions and accurately capture the objective, structural, and fundamental transformations that define human adaptation in the face of profound adversity. As we stand at the threshold of this paradigm shift, I invite the research and clinical community to consider:

- Are we prepared to embrace a more rigorous, observable framework for understanding how humans truly transform after trauma?
- How might the operationalization of the six dimensions of Post-Traumatic Development (PTD) reshape our future research methodologies and redefine the goals of trauma-informed clinical interventions?
- Are there any other dimensions in PTD beyond the six proposed, and what unexplored facets of human transformation might they reveal?

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